Understanding Media Users
Understanding Media Users

From Theory to Practice

Tony Wilson
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I also thank the Australia-Malaysia Institute for providing me with a research fellowship to which University Malaysia Sarawak (Faculty of Economics and Business) responded with the generous offer of accommodation both domestic and scholarly. If there are chapters here with value, much of their content was written peacefully adjacent to the campus mosque accompanied by its early morning call to prayer – *numen tremendum et fascinans*. I also wish to acknowledge the Titi turn in my theory of media use, the insights accruing from my Chinese researcher’s invitation to interview in that west Malaysian town located amidst beautiful mountains and music.

My thanks to those who texted me while I wrote: they know who they are. I am grateful to the Chinese, Indian, and Malay scholars who joined me in research: they are mentioned by name in the pages of this volume. My mother passed away as *Understanding Media Users* came into being: I dedicate this book to her always-focused memory.

Research exemplars in chapters 6 and 9 draw selectively on empirical material published earlier in *New Media and Society* and *Tourist Studies*. 
Informed by my nomadic higher education research and teaching experience in Asia, Australia, and the UK, *Understanding Media Users* offers readers a philosophically rooted guide to audience studies which have emerged over the last quarter of a century. In chapter 1 I discuss European (Structuralist) and US (Effects) audience theory and dismiss both as irredeemably determinist. We respond to screens not as passive objects pushed around by greater forces but as active subjects critical and creative in our comprehension of screen content (see Wilson, 2004).

Media users are no “homogenized,” “indistinguishable” mass (Zhong and Wang, 2006: 26). Researching “ordinary people’s interpretative activities” (Livingstone, 2004: 75) we need to hear their particular justification for interpreting film or cellphone narratives in the way they do. Understanding screen content is a rational *process* which takes time. What are the psychological and social conditions enabling our success? Investigating media use must be “process-oriented rather than result-oriented, interpretive rather than explanatory” (Ang, 1990: 240). Our search is for the underlying universal structure of responses to cinema, soap opera, cyberspace, and cellphone (a *phenomenology* of perception), not for media stimuli causing passive reactions (*positivism*).

From chapter 2 we seek a route through what has become known (somewhat diffusively) as “active audience” theory. The phrase “active audience” has become part of the “shared knowledge” (Roscoe et al., 1995: 88) of media studies. I relate UK work examining screen responses as the viewer’s final judgment on a text to wider European reader reception theory which considers the process of arriving at that judgment. Oddly, British communication studies has been less “sensitive” to the enriching “difference of European ideas” (Nightingale, 1996: 108) than the US school of consumer studies whose contribution I discuss in detail (chapters 7 and 8).
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In writing these chapters my goal has been in presenting audience studies to emerge with a clearly focused claim deriving from media theory after structuralism, an account informed by the latter’s philosophical rival, phenomenology. Seeing is immediately interpretative of its subject on screen. Looking initiates our always culturally located perception of pages, people, or programs as Asian or Caucasian, comprehensible content or enigmatic event, contestable or consensus gaining…. Sadly, there are no cross-culturally given uninterpreted “raw” data.

Nonetheless, there is a universal process of “reading the screen” at the heart of audience response everywhere. For media literacy is ludic – a term which here denotes the customary practice of viewing, not the counter-factual engagement with programs “as raw material with which to fantasize” (Liebes and Katz, 1993: x). As competent audiences, we are both “consumers of the spectacle” and “players in the game” (Ross and Nightingale, 2003: 147) of Big Brother.

The model of media use we shall be pursuing asserts it to be a continually future-oriented goal-focused play-like activity. In “everyday meaning-formation” (Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006: 259) we project and position content in television programs and web pages. Chapter 6 shows the theory’s application to understanding cellphone use. Following a discussion of branding and consumer research guided by phenomenology, my final chapter draws on the model to offer an empirically responsive close analysis of audiences as consumer-citizens reading (creatively, critically) content on television and tourist websites. Almost two decades ago researchers argued that the challenging task lying before them was to “open up the black box hiding the specific social-psychological processes behind and below the general process of reception” (Jensen and Rosengren, 1990: 232). Those processes are studied cross-culturally below.

Making Sense of/in Media Use: Beyond Accumulating Audience Responses

Media research is quantitative and qualitative: we count and conceptualize screen use. Qualitative active audience investigation is both consequent upon and criticizes structuralist study of responses to (principally) film. In structuralism’s successor, reactions (positive or negative) to screen content are considered as creatively drawing on the viewer’s culture, primarily as a gendered and socially located media user with a particular ethnicity and
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This approach is generally regarded as initiated by Brunsdon and Morley in the early 1980s at the University of Birmingham UK Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. It can be named “active audience” theory by virtue of being understood as a reaction against 1970s structuralist accounts of screen narrative as wholly determining viewer response – as excluding significance for local negotiation of meaning.

Understanding Media Users discusses approaches to audiences which maintain that viewers actively interpret content, a perspective to be distinguished not only from structuralist media theory but from passive audience “effects studies.” Effects studies consist of research conceptually articulated from a predominantly US behaviorist perspective. In these accounts, akin to “bullet” or “hypodermic needle” theory of media content’s mechanically pushing viewers’ behavior, events on screen are a two-dimensional cause of three-dimensional consequences. Media stimulate a passive response not mediated by viewer reflection.

Active audience theory has been consistently criticized as indeterminate (Roscoe et al., 1995). What do we mean when we (favorably) characterize an audience as “active”? In answering this question we can turn to the philosophical psychology of phenomenology and its literary offspring, reader reception theory. Here, interest focuses on the media user’s activity of “reading” screen narrative. Research perceives the audience’s making sense of content as a structured cognitive – sometimes very expressive – process. Emphasizing the viewer’s achievement in making a program intelligible, such hermeneutic (Devereux, 2003: 96) media analysis asks the question: what are the enabling conditions of successfully coming to understand screen text? In answering we focus upon cross-cultural consumption of television or Internet.

Taking phenomenology on board, media user theory enables the multi-site research exemplars set out in this book. We can integrate active audience theory’s political emphasis on audience perceptions of their “positioning” by the screen and philosophy’s account of the cognitive activity with which “readers” meet such alignment of viewers by texts. This reading process is hermeneutic – media users render cellphone and cyberspace narrative meaningful.

Active audience theory’s silence (a discursive debit) on how viewers actually achieve understanding is addressed in phenomenology’s thesis that perceiving screen content involves a structured process of thought, albeit often swift. In our “hermeneutical relationship” (Nyre, 2007: 29) with known media we anticipate and actualize meaning, seeking coherence.
Implicitly or explicitly, audience studies appropriate this philosophy of mind to develop a “genre-based theory of interpretation” (Radway, 1991: 10) in which texts are read as instantiating types.

We can ask sociological questions about the construction of media knowledge: how do people arrive at the cultural horizons from which program, phone, and web page content is conceptualized and concretized or read in particular ways? Why are these powerful conceptual perspectives sometimes contested, forming the focus of cultural struggle? Equally, we can raise psychological issues: how do those horizons of understanding constrain (Bird, 2003: 167) as well as creatively enable the process of understanding media? The goal pursued here will be integrating answers to these important questions in media user studies.

Mapping Media Understanding:
Using an Inductive or Interpretative Method?

As Morrison (2003: 124) and others have indicated, research arguing for widely applicable conclusions about TV or Internet use based on a limited number of responses to questionnaires (or inductive reasoning) can find it difficult to justify such generalization, “distinctive” or otherwise (Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 11). Instead, seeking a universal cognitive core at the heart of media experience, Understanding Media Users discusses ways of interpreting people's reactions to content. Underlying variety we can locate a shared or cross-cultural process by reference to which we may account for emerging difference. For “qualitative reception analysis needs to be placed in a broader theoretical framework” (Ang, 1996: 137).

Far from responses to the screen being exclusively explicable in terms of the latter’s content, active audience studies emphasize viewers’ cultural and social experience as a constructive resource supporting discrete responses to TV program or web page. Conceptualizing reading as a meaning-making process, hermeneutics investigates how media users succeed in understanding narrative on TV and Internet often widely diverse in their cultural content.

Our inquiry into how we make sense of what we see on screen is guided by the insight from phenomenology that audience achievement of intelligibility requires cognitive activity: from the moment at which we commence viewing we entertain informed expectations or “projections” (Gadamer, 1975: 224) of textual meaning which our reading then shows to be accurate – or
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otherwise. For in media reception, viewers draw on their established “horizons of understanding” (ibid.: 217) or wider experience of narrative patterns as “media templates” (Kitzinger, 2000), positions of knowledgeable advantage allowing them to anticipate character development and events. The latter may or may not emerge as actually occurring.

This conceptual context of comprehension or “anticipation and retrospection” (Lury, 2005: 95) in looking at the screen sets the terms of media literacy (Livingstone, 2007a). Audiences seek (and sometimes fail) to integrate confirmed conjectural projections of television program or web page content in a synthesizing “hermeneutic circle of understanding” (Gadamer, 1975: 167), relating elements of a text to its perceived entirety. Likewise, consumers construct or “stitch” together (Ruddock, 2007: 130) coherent narratives of television or online marketing in their accounts of achieved anticipation.

Qualitative empirical research testing such communications or consumer reception theory is often conducted in focus groups whose participants discuss their responses to particular cellphone, television, or Internet narratives (e.g., adverts). Contributions confirm or contradict and frequently enrich an emerging philosophical psychology of media use – or media user theory.

Media user theory builds upon the insight from uses and gratifications analyses that people derive intrinsic and instrumental satisfaction from their screen-related activity. Drawing on philosophically attuned reception psychology, the theory presented below holds that activity to be at its core an interpretative play-like (ludic) process integrating past, present, and future cultural moments. Instrumental media use constrains immersion in this “game” (although one of my students argued that a Google search could be a source of absorbing intrinsic pleasure). We note the emphasis on uses and gratifications theory in Chinese media studies journals over the last thirty years and the call to integrate this work with “reception analysis” (Zhou, 2006: 129).

Notes

1 Like Seiter in her guiding text Television and New Media Audiences (1999: 5) most of my examples will be drawn from projects I have conducted with others.
2 Barker calls for audience research to go “beyond accumulation” (2006) of studies to develop a theoretical model of our media response. Seeking the psychological structure of “understanding” as a continuing process focused on screen
content, Understanding Media Users addresses this project by drawing on Heideggerian and later hermeneutic phenomenology. This may not be the theory transcending the piecemeal study which Barker had in mind (and the mistakes are mine), but I am grateful that he signaled the need for a “fore-concept” of understanding “understanding.”

A distinction between “intrinsic” and “instrumental” media use is made by others (e.g., Moyal, 1992: 53). In regard to phone use, the former (calls for pleasure) can include “all intimate discussion and exchange,” while the latter (calls for a purpose) involves “calls of a functional nature” (ibid.). It is clear that a call can shift from the first to the second category (e.g., an intimate conversation which turns to resolving a “household crisis”). Likewise, a dutiful phone call may be continued for enjoyment. Media use is fundamentally immersive, analogous to a game in absorbing one in another space and time: functional media use remains tethered to here and now.
1

A Passive Audience?
Structuralist and Effects Studies

How do we respond to cellphone, film, Internet, television screens? Are there fundamental differences in our reactions to format and technology—or a core similarity? How do we cross cultures in understanding content? What is the relationship between the psychology of individual “readings” and the sociology of responses by groups, genders, generations? How can “scientific” audience research advance beyond accumulating data—what is “progress” in media user studies?

Addressing these questions throughout this volume, I begin with a short new media narrative of everyday cellphone use in a complex Southeast Asian city. Its content will be easily recognized by many among today’s traveling academics and students (the few Australians in the large undergraduate and postgraduate classes I teach in Sydney are far outnumbered by those who have joined us from nations overseas). To others this story will seem more distantly located, though its moments of involved absorption and anticipation of screen text we shall argue are global. For the purpose of this brief book is to gain insight into the underlying universal structure of media use.

This short narrative was recounted to me and another researcher talking to people visiting a transnational telecommunications company customer support center at a vast shopping mall in central Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia’s capital city. (The hybrid name of the center’s location—Berjaya Times Square—signals the status which some have given Kuala Lumpur as the world’s most global or postmodernist metropolis by virtue of its multicultural Asian-Western architecture, food, religious expression, and population). Many of these customers had come to the center to ask about their cellphone use or (as in the case of our story’s source) to register their postpaid account in response to new legislation (see an extended description in chapter 6).

In this narrative a Chinese Malaysian middle-aged woman (or “aunt” in Malaysian English) tells us about the everyday but engaging pleasure
she derives from the cellphone’s ability to immerse her interest, with its incoming messages particularly distracting her from the tumultuous city through which she travels by bus. Let us call her (fictitiously) Ai Wei. Her times of passive absorption, of focusing on the phone, it is important to be aware, are simultaneously moments of active anticipation. Electronically engaged, she enthusiastically expects its narrative.

Never merely concentrated on the immediate present (caller numbers), Ai Wei’s immersion in screen data is always also an informed future-focused concern with the associated call content she would receive by clicking on her cellphone pad. As the philosopher Heidegger might well have said had wireless communication existed in the last century, her absorption is continually fore-structured by anticipation or fore-sight: she has an always present fore-concept (1962) of messages from “familiar numbers” as “safe to access.” Displaying an interpretative understanding of her digital-human environment, Ai Wei tells us in everyday words which need to be addressed by theory, “when I look at the number and I’m not familiar, normally I wouldn’t pick it up” because unknown callers are likely to be “weird [people]” who “give you those noises.”

In her cellphone use, this Malaysian Chinese aunt blurs the public-private distinction which has governed much media research conducted either outside or within the home (see Gauntlett and Hill, 1999: 4). For within the “architectonic structure” (García-Montes et al., 2006: 72) of the surrounding city Ai Wei links with domesticity, her (spatiotemporally) extended family. Receiving those calls or texts she chooses to hear or read, Ai Wei pursues (like their sender) a coherent meaning for their content. Absorbing rather than alienating her, a message can enlighten her life: “when I receive an SMS from my niece” who is able to use “all the short forms and even insert a picture,” “it makes my day.” Considering her subjective narrative in more abstract terms, we shall see in subsequent chapters that its underlying structure of perception, prediction, positing, and pleasurable acquisition of appropriate meaning characterizes audience activity widely. We need to confirm such theory (or at least fail to falsify it) by referring to everyday accounts of media use beyond questionnaires. Screen content can prompt painful responses.

Our Times Square interviewee ignores caller numbers she does not recognize: she resists responding, anticipating that she would hear “weird” sounds rather than comfortably familiar communication. Ai Wei reduces (“deconstructs”) the former as dehumanized “noises” rather than meaningful messages and distances herself from such contact. However, as
someone who herself writes SMS, she identifies with her niece’s processing of communicative intent, evaluating her literacy favorably: “it makes my day.” A less caring aunt could have displayed apathy.

Ai Wei has a complex response to her cellphone call and messaging content, appropriating some items, alienated by others. Appreciative but equally analytical, she resembles a fan of phoning, “moving fluidly” between “proximity and distance” from the material (Jenkins, 1992: 65).

Audiences actively interpret screen content. From a sociological point of view, using media across the world draws upon people’s different cultural perspectives on events seen and heard. Muslim Malays characteristically do not regard television’s religious images of Islamic practice in the same way as Caucasian Christians. We shall see Chinese New Year interpreted differently.

But the psychological process of our coming to understand stories has the same structure everywhere. Drawing on our background knowledge of media forms, patterns, or types, we identify narratives we hear or see unfolding: we anticipate and construct an account of their meaning. Program content confirms or upsets our preceding concepts (or stereotypes). This model of understanding we shall see is fundamental to integrating the study of media users.

In the pages which follow we trace the evolution of insights into media reception through the last thirty years of audience investigation – from European structuralism and North American effects studies to considering viewers as active, and from reader reception research to new media user theory. This is an important path to follow through communication studies linking “questions of signification” on screens to “questions of subjectivity” (MacCabe, 1985: 6) amidst audiences.

At different stages on this route we can look sideways and evaluate environmentally, weighing up from an “audience perspective” other aspects of media studies such as narrative theory or the political economy of content production. Moreover, at the conclusion of this discursive excursion, I shall show that knowing how we “read” media enables us to gain insight into a wide range of screen-using activity, from successfully advertising Coca-Cola on television in an Islamic majority nation to Asian tourists enjoyably engaged in reading Western websites.

So how do we draw on culture to construct an identity for screen content and self concept? I maintain throughout this book that we react to films, programs, or web pages in ways which are globally (psychologically) alike and locally (sociologically) particular. The cultural identity I am proposing for ourselves as media users is both fixed and fluid. The cognitive process at